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PRRC emerging trends

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Public Losing Confidence In Organized Religion

For the first time in over a decade, the church or organized religion has lost its primacy as the institution in which the American people have the greatest confidence. That distinction went to the military in a July Gallup Poll, the latest to assess the public's trust. In surveys conducted periodically since 1975 the military had been the second or third-highest rated institution.

In the July survey 63% said they had a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the military, statistically unchanged from the 61% recorded in last year's poll.

Organized religion, in which 66% indicated a high degree of confidence last year, fell to 57% in the 1986 survey. In seven previous surveys, the percentage expressing a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the church had ranged from a high of 68% (in 1975) to a low of 62% (in 1983).

Consistent with the results of earlier surveys, Protestants, women, blacks, older Americans, Southerners, and the less well educated and less affluent currently express greater confidence in the church than do people from different socio-economic backgrounds. Comparison of the results of the 1985 and 1986 polls, however, shows the recent decline in confidence to have occurred among all population groups, including those mentioned above.

Supreme Court Ranks Third

The U.S. Supreme Court is the third-highest rated institution, with 53% currently expressing a high level of confidence. Tied for fourth are banks and public schools, each with 49%. The other institutions studied and the percentages saying they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in each are: Congress (41%), newspapers (37%), organized labor (29%), big business (28%), and television (27%).

Aside from the 9 percentage point drop for organized religion, the current figures for the other institutions are not statistically different from those obtained in last year's poll.

Here is the question and highlights of the trend:

I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Would you please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one — a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little?

Confidence in Institutions
(Percent saying "great deal" or "quite a lot")

	1986 %	1985 %	1983 %	1979 %	1973 %
Military	63	61	53	54	*
Church or organized religion	57	66	62	65	66
U.S. Supreme Court	53	56	42	45	44
Banks	49	51	51	60	*
Public schools	49	48	39	53	58
Congress	41	39	28	34	42
Newspapers	37	35	38	51	39
Organized labor	29	28	26	36	30
Big business	28	31	28	32	26
Television	27	29	25	38	37

* Not asked.

As shown in the following table, the decline in confidence in the church or organized religion between the 1985 and 1986 surveys traces to all major segments of the population. The differences in the size of the decline among different groups, such as gender, age, education and region, may be attributable to random sampling variability.

Church or Organized Religion
(Percent saying "great deal" or "quite a lot")

	1986	1985	Difference
NATIONAL	57%	66%	– 9 points
Men	52	63	– 11
Women	62	69	– 7
Whites	57	65	– 8
Blacks	65	73	– 8
Protestants	63	73	– 10
Catholics	58	70	– 12
18-29 years	51	65	– 14
30-49 years	56	63	– 7
50 & older	62	71	– 9
College grads	52	60	– 8
College inc	55	60	– 5
High school grads	60	70	– 10
Not H.S. grads	61	72	– 11
$25,000 & over	53	62	– 9
Under $25,000	60	69	– 9
East	53	57	– 4
Midwest	58	70	– 12
South	67	75	– 8
West	47	59	– 12

The latest results are based on in-person interviews with 1,539 adults, 18 and older, conducted in over 300 scientifically selected localities across the nation during the period July 11-14. For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be 3 percentage points in either direction.

In addition to sampling error, the reader should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls. *These statements conform to the standards of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.*

Faith Development and Your Ministry

If you preach, write, or teach, we sincerely believe you will find FAITH DEVELOPMENT AND YOUR MINISTRY to be of great help in your work.

This new publication may be ordered from The Princeton Religion Research Center, Inc., P.O. Box 628, Princeton, NJ 08542. The cost is $25 per copy.

7 in 10 U.S. Adults Are Church Members

The proportion of U.S. adults who say they are church members has changed little in recent years, with 7 in 10 (71%) now claiming membership in a church or synagogue. The highest level of membership (76%) was found in 1947, close to the 73% recorded in the first Gallup audit, in 1937.

It is important to bear in mind that the membership figures reported here are self-classifications, representing the proportion of people who say they are members of a church or synagogue, and may include some who are not actually on the rolls of local churches. It should also be noted that adherents of certain faiths — for example, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches — are considered members at birth.

Here is the question:

Do you happen to be a member of a church or synagogue?

Church Synagogue Membership

1986	69%
1985	71
1984	68
1983	69
1982	67*
1981	68
1980	69
1979	68
1978	68
1977	70
1976	71
1975	71
1965	73
1952	73
1947	76**
1944	75
1942	75
1940	72
1939	72
1938	73
1937	73

*Low point.
**High point.

The attendance and membership figures are based on surveys conducted in five selected weeks during 1986 in more than 300 scientifically selected localities across the nation. A total of 6,663 adults, 18 and older, were interviewed in person.

4 in 10 Adults Attended Church In Typical Week of 1986

Four adults in every 10 (40%) attended church or synagogue in a typical week in 1986.

Churchgoing has remained remarkably constant since 1969 after having declined from the high point of 49% recorded in 1955 and 1958.

The level of churchgoing in 1986 was higher among women (46% attended in a typical week) than among men (33%) and among older persons than younger. Nationally, 49% of Catholics, 41% of Protestants and 20% of Jews attended.

Southerners and Midwesterners were most apt to attend church weekly, while Westerners had the lowest level of attendance. Blacks and Hispanics are slightly more likely than whites to attend church in a typical week.

To estimate the average attendance during 1986, surveys of representative samples of the adult population were made in five selected weeks during the year.

This question was asked:

Did you, yourself, happen to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days?

Following is a selected trend since 1939. The audits from 1955 through 1986 were based on an average of several surveys during each year. The figures prior to 1955 were based on a single annual survey.

Church Synagogue Attendance

1986	40%
1985	42
1984	40
1983	40
1982	41
1981	41
1980	40
1979	40
1978	41
1977	41
1972	40
1969	42
1967	43
1962	46
1958	49*
1957	47
1955	49*
1954	46
1950	39
1940	37**
1939	41

*High points.
**Low point.

Following are the results of the latest audit by key population groups:

Church Synagogue Attendance
1986

NATIONAL	40%
Men	33
Women	46
Protestants	41
Catholics	49
Jews	20
18-24 years	33
25-29 years	33
30-49 years	39
50-64 years	47
65 & older	49
East	39
Midwest	42
South	43
West	35
College graduates	42
College incomplete	41
High school graduates	40
Not H.S. graduates	38
Whites	40
Blacks	43
Hispanics	46

The attendance figures are based on three in-person surveys, conducted in more than 300 scientifically selected localities across the nation, and two telephone surveys in five selected weeks during 1986. A total of 6,633 adults, 18 and older, were interviewed.

For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be 2 percentage points in either direction. Larger allowances should be made for sub-groups in the sample.

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As Many Today as in 1980 Are 'Very Satisfied' with Families

Despite the high divorce rate, alcohol and drug use, poverty and other problems that are undermining the U.S. family, as high a proportion of Americans today (45%) as in 1980 (47%) say they are "very satisfied" with their family life.

In the current survey, as in the 1980 survey, about equal proportions say they are "very" and "mostly" satisfied. Few in either survey say they are either mostly or very dissatisfied.

The question and national findings:

How satisfied would you say you are with your own family life at this time — would you say you are very satisfied, mostly satisfied, mostly dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with your family life at this time?

Satisfaction with Family Life

	1986	1980
Very satisfied	45%	47%
Mostly satisfied	48	44
Mostly dissatisfied	3	6
Very dissatisfied	2	2
No opinion	2	1
	100%	100%

Younger persons and survey respondents with relatively little formal education are less likely than their counterparts to say they are "very satisfied" with their family life.

Impact of Religion on Families Measured

Religion is seen by a large majority of Americans, 72%, as strengthening family relationships either "a great deal" or "somewhat." Only about one person in four, 26%, says, "hardly at all" or "not at all."

Little change in the perceptions of religion's impact is noted since the earlier (1980) survey, as seen in the following table:

Religion's Influence on Home

To what extent, if at all, has religion in your home strengthened family relationships — a great deal, somewhat, hardly at all, or not at all?

	1986	1980
A great deal	35%	39%
Somewhat	37	35
Hardly at all	16	12
Not at all	10	11
No opinion	2	3
	100%	100%

Perceptions of Other Families

Undoubtedly reflecting in considerable measure the improved overall economic climate, a higher proportion of Americans today (53%) than in 1980 say the family life of most of the people they know has gotten better. A total of 53% hold this view today, compared to 37% in 1980.

The question and findings:

As a general rule, would you say that the family life of most of the people you know has gotten better or gotten worse in the last 15 years or so?

Has Family Life for Other People Gotten Better or Worse?

	1986	1980
Better	53%	37%
Worse	33	45
Same	8	12
No opinion	6	6
	100%	100%

The latest findings are based on telephone interviews with 504 adults, 18 and older, conducted in scientifically selected localities across the nation during the period Oct. 10-Nov. 10, 1986. For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be 6 percentage points in either direction.

The 1980 findings are from a survey conducted by The Gallup Organization for the White House Conference on Families in which a total of 1,592 adults were interviewed in person.

How Involved Are Your Parishioners Compared to National Averages?

How involved are your parishioners in religious activities compared to percentages for the U. S. public as a whole?

In a survey conducted for The Robert H. Schuller Ministries, a national sample of 1,522 adults were interviewed in person on awareness of, and involvement in, 10 religious activities. Although the survey was conducted in 1984, it is unlikely that the percentages would differ much from those recorded in a similar survey today.

The first question deals with awareness:

On this card are some current activities that cut across denominational lines. Which of these have you heard anything about?

The highest percentages are recorded for "ministries dealing with world hunger," "healing ministries," and "home Bible study or fellowship groups."

Here is the full list:

Activities Heard Of?

	NATIONAL %
Ministries dealing with world hunger	63
Healing ministries	58
Home Bible study or fellowship groups	58
Religious coalitions against nuclear warfare	51
Prison ministries	50
Group therapy sessions	39
The charismatic movement	35
Positive thinking seminars	35
Social protests or activism	35
Holistic health activities	26

The next question asked about contact with the activities tested in the survey:

Which ones, if any, have you had contact with?

Topping the list was "home Bible study or fellowship groups," named by 28% of persons interviewed.

Here is the full list:

Activities Had Contact With?

	NATIONAL %
Home Bible study or fellowship groups	28
Ministries dealing with world hunger	15
Healing ministries	11
The charismatic movement	10
Positive thinking seminars	10
Prison ministries	8
Group therapy sessions	8
Religious coalition against nuclear warfare	6
Holistic health activities	6
Social protest or activism	5

The final question focused on levels of involvement:

Which ones, if any, are you, yourself, involved in?

The highest percentages are recorded for "home Bible study or fellowship groups," named by 18%, followed by "ministries dealing with world hunger" (7%).

Here is the full list:

Activities Involved In?

	NATIONAL %
Home Bible study or fellowship groups	18
Ministries dealing with world hunger	7
Positive thinking seminars	5
Healing ministries	4
Group therapy sessions	4
The charismatic movement	3
Prison ministries	3
Religious coalitions against nuclear warfare	2
Social protest or activism	2
Holistic health activities	2

Majority of Americans Say Religion Is 'Very Important' In Their Lives

A majority of Americans (55%) say religion is "very important" in their lives today, with women, older persons, Southerners, blacks, and Southern Baptists most likely to give this response.

The national percentage of U.S. adults who say religion plays a very important role in their lives has been remarkably stable during the 1980s. The latest figure, for example, matches the 1985 figure (also 55%).

Although there has been little change in recent years in the proportion of Americans who say religion is very important in their lives, the current figure is 20 points lower than that recorded in 1952 when 75% gave this response.

Following is the question on the importance of religion and the trend:

How important would you say religion is in your life — very important, fairly important, or not very important?

Importance of Religion

	Very important	Fairly important	Not very important
	%	%	%
1986	55	30	14
1985	55	31	13
1984	56	30	13
1983	56	30	13
1982	56	30	13
1981	56	29	14
1980	55	31	13
1978	52	32	14
1965	70	22	7
1952	75	20	5

NOTE: "No opinion" excluded.

The 1986 figures are based on interviews with 6,633 adults, interviewed in five selected weeks during the year.

For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be 2 percentage points in either direction. Larger allowances should be made for subgroups in the sample.

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